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VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

(Convocation address, Ohio State University, December 22, 1937
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Occasions like this afford the speaker of the day an opportunity to account for all of society's ailments and to offer a panacea for their cure. No doubt you are prepared to listen to my plan of world salvation. Being only an interested observer and not a doctor of economic, political and social ills, I must, at the outset, disappoint you by admitting that I have no cure-all for the troubles which you are about to face. Even if I knew all the answers I would withhold them from you because I have too much interest in your future development to deprive you of the benefits to be derived from self help. As a matter of fact, I congratulate you upon the occasion which thrusts you into a world full of problems awaiting solution.

You are about to be offered the opportunity for which you have been preparing. May you grasp it with courage and determination, sustained by the knowledge that the worst failures are recorded against those who refuse to try. Only slackers can escape the responsibility of giving their best. The penalty which they suffer--the necessity of living with their cowardice--is the most severe that can be imposed upon them. The masses of our people, lacking the comprehension which comes to the favored few who occupy the positions which you enjoy today, are greatly perplexed and bewildered by their day-to-day problems. They demand leadership and frequently follow that which is most readily available,

be it true or false.

With increasing interdependence among all classes of people, we continue to hear more about mass activities and less about the old fashioned virtues of individual achievement. Let me remind you, however, that individualism has not been relegated to the limbo of departed characteristics. It has changed its complexion in such manner as to represent an effective disguise to many people who look to the masses for creative expression. But the masses in turn look to their individual leaders for guidance and direction. As a consequence, the former narrow, isolationist conception of individualism has given place to the broader image of leadership with the wealth of power and accomplishment which that idea conveys.

Universities--if their products justify their name--are engaged in selecting candidates for leadership and in training them for the tasks which they will be called upon to perform. The years of study which you have spent in the attainment of a status which will soon be recognized by the label "college graduate" have been devoted largely to the history and the theory of your chosen fields. In the world outside the University, no doubt you will be looked upon, not too cordially, as theorists. I sincerely hope that you are and that you will never cease to qualify under that title. All successful leaders--in the professions, in government, and in business--are theorists. Among the most useless things which you will ever encounter, you may give high rank to mere facts. Facts, generalized into theories,

are indispensable; isolated and unrelated, they are practically useless. Cultivate your theoretical interests if you would reap a harvest of leadership.

Undoubtedly you will wish to be known as practical men and women. Nearly everyone cherishes that ambition. The formula to attain this goal is simple. Correlate the facts of your experience and observation in such manner as to formulate sound theories and you are practical. Misinterpret your facts, ignore important information, or draw the wrong conclusions and you are impractical. This does not necessarily mean that you will lack a following because many impractical schemes attract the temporary support of hopeful but impractical people.

The life in which you are about to participate will differ in many respects from the student life you have enjoyed. It may bring you disillusionment. If the ideas which you have acquired in college are false, let us hope that the disillusioning process will begin promptly and will be thorough in its operation. If you can make ready adjustment to realities without losing sight of your objectives, there will be no cause for discouragement merely because realizations are different from your expectations. Make sure that your ideas are false before you abandon them. In his teens Mark Twain found the ignorance of his father very depressing. A few years later he was agreeably surprised to discover how much the old gentleman had learned in a short period of time.

While for most of you this day marks the close of your

college career, the learning process should continue indefinitely under a new and changing corps of teachers, using methods of instruction different from those to which you have been accustomed. Indeed some of your new teachers may deprecate the mental equipment which you bring to them and may openly express their contempt for your academic instructors. If they do, they will probably use the most devastating reproach in their vocabulary. They will call us "visionaries". We accept the compliment and trust that our actions merit the rarest meaning the dictionary gives to this word--"those having deep insight and penetrating minds".

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to distinguish the possessor of these qualifications from the impractical dreamer who belongs under the more common definition of the term "visionary". Nevertheless, we must set goals for ourselves and put forth our best efforts to attain them. And so I venture the hope that Ohio State University may continue to attract to its faculty not impractical dreamers, each with a different panacea "guaranteed" to cure all our ills, but men and women of "deep insight and penetrating minds" who have the courage to analyze and to interpret conditions as they find them and the capacity to transmit to their students the means of facing life's problems realistically.

When we consider the nature of the problems which give us greatest concern, two significant impressions stand out: First, the baffling complexity of the conditions which create them; and second, the audacity of the proposals freely offered for their

solution. Because these proposals differ from each other so radically, their supporters seek to demonstrate their superiority by force of numbers. Even those who would choose to be bystanders are invited and, by the weight of circumstances, even forced to assume the roles of protagonists and antagonists. There is little opportunity left for the observer, the analyst, the recorder, and the commentator.

It is difficult, if not usually impossible, for anyone to become an active participant in a sharply drawn controversy without losing considerable of his capacity for the exercise of impartial analysis. The necessity for specialization is so great and the need for concentration is so apparent that each should choose the field in which he thinks he can be happiest and most useful, leaving alternative activities to other specialists exercising somewhat different qualifications. The University should be the haven for the individual who wishes to observe, to analyze, to record, and to comment impartially upon his findings. These are the chief characteristics of a university's functions.

To an increasing extent, the fortunes of a state university are directly related to those of the state which supports it. It is interesting to note the accumulating evidence of dependence of other state agencies upon this University for advice and assistance. This is as it should be. Unfortunately, the legitimate demands for professional services to agencies of the state and its subdivisions frequently exceed the capacity of the University

to supply and at the same time carry on its campus activities. An institution like Ohio State University should not consider itself apart from the state but a part of it. Its founders planned it to be a dynamic force in the life of the state. This tradition has been preserved throughout its history. The citizens of Ohio have a right to look to it for leadership and guidance. By this I do not mean that its facilities should be placed at the beck and call of individual citizens or even of small groups. But it is properly concerned with programs which interest large groups of our people and should be able and ready to render service to them through advice and availability of information. The progress already made in this direction by some of our departments might well be reviewed by others that to date have engaged but little in such activities.

In return for the investment in plant and equipment and for the annual maintenance costs borne by our tax payers, the University should continue to add to its present services new methods of including the people of the state--other than its students--among those who enjoy the fruits of its educational facilities. To the extent that our faculty members possess "deep insight and penetrating minds", they should be able to maintain this University as the intellectual center of the state. To set for ourselves a goal less ambitious than this is to betray the trust imposed upon us.

Education is a product for which there is a very elastic demand.

New peaks of enrollment in our colleges and universities give no cause for surprise. Only the occasional temporary declines create comment. Americans generally have high aspirations for their children. An analysis of the hopes of the average family would reveal near the top of the list--above the desires for leisure and comfort and even security--a steadfast purpose to afford to the younger generation educational facilities denied to the parents. There are probably in this audience today those whose presence is made possible only by the sacrifices of loved ones at home. Such self-denial strengthens our faith in the permanence of our cherished institutions. Education is the one investment which can neither be stolen nor hypothecated and which always appreciates in value.

Increasing demands for the advantages of higher education for more and ever more people can be met only at correspondingly increasing cost. Within the limits of their resources, residents of a progressive state like Ohio never hesitate to spend the money needed to purchase goods and services which they consider indispensable to their happiness and well being. If, in the minds of some people, less important considerations take precedence over the demands of education, it is due in large part to the faulty presentation of the claims of the latter. The advertising business has pretty well exploded the "mousetrap" theory. There are times when education finds itself in keen competition with other bidders for the too small supply of the consumer's dollars; especially when the particular consumer is not immediately interested in the education of a child or other ward.

Please do not misinterpret my suggestions. I make no plea for mere bigness in the size of our student body, in the extent of our educational program, or in the amount of appropriations necessary to promote the interests of either. A university exists primarily for the service it can render its constituents, both in the classroom and out of it. The greater its facilities, the more and the better service it can render. With the probability of ever-increasing educational demands, it must develop its facilities to keep pace with them.

There are times when we become so much engrossed in the affairs of the moment that we lose our perspective and trustworthy guideposts cease to have meaning. On such occasions we should take time out to review our history. There we may live again the experiences of those who have preceded us. We can take courage from their accomplishments against odds greater than those we are usually called upon to face. They suffered defeats and faced disappointments; but the heritage of opportunity which they left for us is the most eloquent testimony of their final successes. Among their leaders were visionaries of both types. We can smile tolerantly at the record of proposals by impractical dreamers of days gone by because, for the most part, that record is one of failures. We shudder to think what might have been the course of events had greater success been the reward of their efforts. We prefer to dwell upon the records of those other visionary leaders--those men and women of "keen insight and

penetrating minds"--who were able to carry their heads high enough to permit their vision to center upon their major objectives while they were making day-to-day adjustment to the obstacles at their feet. These are the leaders whose records respond when we call the roll of achievement.

Curiously enough, while we usually classify impractical dreamers under descriptive labels--since this is usually the best and frequently the only means of identifying them--we always have very great difficulty in grouping real leaders into fixed classes. Somehow we always think of them in terms of their contributions to the arts and sciences, education, government, commerce and industry, or other fields of activity to which they give their attention. Even though they fit very general classifications borne by other people, we distinguish them by their achievements. Such leaders need no identifying marks to insure recognition.

History loses much of its utility unless we use it in understanding our present problems and in anticipating those we shall be called upon to face in the future. Many present day problems have no solution that is not based upon an appreciation of their roots in the past. Today's events are the effects of yesterday's causes. In turn they become the causes of tomorrow's effects. A cross-section study which omits attention to the chain of evidence may produce erroneous conclusions.

No problem ever stays solved. Its tentative solution creates

new problems, each pressing for attention. As a consequence, progress is most often made by a process of accommodation to changing circumstances. Seldom are we able to ignore the present and the immediate past in planning the future. Impractical dreamers who sponsor programs unrelated to experience face disappointment when their efforts fail to produce desired results. No one has ever been able to short-out the habits of the child who must crawl before he can walk and walk before he can run. In any learning process we never cease to be children. As individuals and as groups we make most rapid progress by adjustment to the obstacles in our paths. The leader who possesses keen insight and a penetrating mind does not stumble over these obstacles as he presses toward his goal. Neither does he permit them to divert his attention from his major objectives. By constant attention to them and adjustment of his plans, he is able to accomplish worthwhile results in spite of opposition.

Accommodation and adjustment imply compromise which means only partial victory. It means also partial defeat. As future leaders, you will be concerned with the choices of concessions that you can afford to make in exchange for the support you will sometimes need in securing acceptance of your ideas. The winner in such an exchange will, temporarily at least, wear the crown of leadership. The ratio of your successes to your defeats measures your stature as a leader.

Let no one discourage you with comparisons which place the

realities of the present and the prospects for the future at a disadvantage, in contrast with the past. The records invite no such comparisons. Leaders of the right sort have no time for the wailings of pessimists who see only disaster ahead. Neither do they permit blind optimists to undertake to illuminate dark places with glib phrases. Only the beams from a penetrating mind have that capacity. Guided by the rays of keen insight, real leaders build their future rather than attempt to cause it to appear by rubbing Alladin's lamp.

And so it is with a distinct feeling of pride in your capacities and of confident hope for your future achievements that Ohio State University offers the services of the members of this graduating class to the various fields of interest for which you have been preparing. May you ever have cause to share with your alma mater the satisfactions that will reward your successes.

As students of this University, you have been the beneficiaries of contributions made by others. In turn you are expected to assist in making future generations of students your beneficiaries. One of the most effective ways this can be accomplished is through criticisms and suggestions which will grow out of your future experiences. We have tried to assist you in planning a future of leadership. If we have fallen short of our potentialities, help us to avoid the repetition of our mistakes. Pride in your alma mater will stimulate you to wish it to become more

effective in its assistance to those who follow you. The bond which unites you as alumni becomes increasingly stronger with use. Ohio State University reserves the right to bask in the reflected glory of your successes. To the extent that it rises to greater heights of usefulness to its constituents your own statures as its alumni will assume added importance.

As the members of the faculty, the administrative officers, and the board of trustees bid you God speed, our emotions are tinged with a feeling of envy because of the years that separate us. Life to us has been full of interest because of the kaleidoscopic and, we hope, progressive character of its changes. You younger people have a right to anticipate a longer experience ahead because of your greater life expectancy. Each day will produce new problems and each problem will be a challenge to your best efforts.

May you find life's greatest satisfactions to be the rewards which come to those who face difficult tasks courageously. Graduation from this University places you in a select class whose members are limited to those who have enjoyed like opportunities. The privileges accorded to the members of this select group are many. The responsibilities may be summed up in one admonition: Limited only by the bounds of your own capacities, you are expected to develop and to exercise the qualities of that rare type of visionary leadership--keen insight and penetrating minds.